

Brussels, 10 December 2009

10 December 2009 – Human Rights Day

The Human Rights Day focuses on non-discrimination with the motto “Embrace diversity, end discrimination”. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights establishes that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights”, millions around the globe face discrimination in their daily lives. Discrimination on grounds such as sex, racial and ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation is incompatible with the basic principles on which the European Union is founded. The prohibition of discrimination is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. The EU is committed to fight against all forms of discrimination both in the EU and worldwide.

Catherine Ashton, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy declared: "The European Union and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights are united in their desire and efforts to make discrimination a feature of the past. The Commission is one of the most important contributors to the voluntary budget of the OHCHR through the Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. This is a clear expression of our determination to join forces with the OHCHR in the fight against discrimination both in the EU and worldwide."

Vice-President Jacques Barrot, Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security said: "Racism and xenophobia are a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms, which are principles upon which the European Union is founded and common to the Member States. There is no place for racism and xenophobia in Europe; nor should there be in any other part of the world. Dialogue and understanding should overcome hatred and provocation."

Vladimír Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities added: "Discrimination represents a waste of talent and a denial of fundamental rights. Equality and non-discrimination are not luxuries reserved for times of economic growth. With unemployment rising and the risk of poverty and exclusion increasing in the current economic recession, the EU and the Member States need to strengthen their commitment to equal opportunities more than ever. Tackling all forms of discrimination has been a priority for this Commission and for me personally".

Background:

Discrimination as well as racism, xenophobia and related intolerance are problems facing all societies and all countries throughout the world. Combating racism and discrimination is a priority for the European Union (EU).

The Treaty on the Functioning of the EU provides the legal base to act against discrimination. More specifically, in addition to laws on equal treatment of men and women, the EU has put in place legislation to ensure minimum levels of protection from discrimination for everyone living and working in Europe. These laws are designed to ensure equal treatment irrespective of racial or ethnic origin, religion and belief, disability, sexual orientation and age. These laws aim to ensure equal treatment in many aspects of daily life: depending on the ground of discrimination, they cover employment and occupation, or also education, social security and healthcare and access to goods and services available to the public. The EU has also adopted legislation which prohibits public incitement to violence and hatred against a group of persons or a member of a group, defined by reference to race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin. This legislation is to be implemented by all EU Member States by the end of 2010. The EU has also put in place legislation which bans incitement to hatred on the basis of race, sex, religion or nationality in television broadcasts and video on demand services.

The European Commission undertakes also other activities in order to promote equal opportunities and prevent racism, xenophobia and related intolerance. These include activities for raising awareness and promoting the exchange of information and best practices among EU Member States and other relevant actors in the field. Furthermore, the Commission supports activities on the ground through its financial programs. In 2007, an EU Agency for Fundamental Rights was set up to collect, analyse and disseminate data with the purpose of assisting the EU institutions and Member States when they take measures or formulate courses of action within their respective spheres of competence.

The EU is well aware of the problems facing our own region. The Roma, one of the biggest ethnic minorities in the EU, have legal protection from discrimination yet many of them still experience it. The European Commission is working with the EU Member States to tackle this discrimination and to improve the social and economic conditions of this community. To promote the inclusion of this community in the education system and labour markets, while preventing violence against them, are actually priorities identified in the Stockholm Programme to be adopted at the European Council of 10-11 December 2009. This programme places the citizens and the Fundamental rights at the center of the Justice and Home affairs policy for the next 5 years.

Equal pay for equal work is one of the EU's founding principles. Yet the gender pay gap is still an average of 17.5% across the EU, and reflects discrimination and inequalities in the labour market which, in practice, mainly affect women. The European Commission launched an information campaign in 2009 in all EU countries about the gender pay gap. The campaign aims to raise awareness of the pay gap among citizens, employers and workers and how it can be tackled.

The EU is also significantly contributing to the combat against discrimination, racism and xenophobia worldwide. The EU raises these issues frequently in its political dialogues with third countries. Also, the EU actively co-operates with the UN in tackling racism and discrimination and supports the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, xenophobia and related intolerance.

Persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to discrimination. The European Community together with all its Member States signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The process of conclusion is well advanced. It is a clear landmark for Europe, as for the first time ever the EU becomes party to a comprehensive UN human rights convention.

The combat against discrimination, racism and xenophobia have also been mainstreamed in cooperation strategies. For example, under the European Neighbourhood Policy Action Plans, the partner countries commit themselves to cooperation to combat all forms of discrimination, religious intolerance, racism and xenophobia. In addition, through its European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, the EU supports the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and through the PROGRESS program and the Fundamental Rights and Citizenship program give support to European NGOs and other stakeholders for their work on combating racism, xenophobia and discrimination.

Further information on EU human rights policies:

Human rights in the world

http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/human_rights/index_en.htm

Diversity & Non-discrimination

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=781>

Fundamental rights

http://ec.europa.eu/justice_home/fsj/rights/fsj_rights_intro_en.htm

European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights

http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/finance/eidhr_en.htm